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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000869

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [BA](#) [POL](#) [REFORM](#)
SUBJECT: AL WIFAQ ENCOURAGED BY REACTION TO PARTICIPATION
VOTE, OUTLINES PLANS

REF: MANAMA 765

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Al Wifaq's May 1 decision to participate in this year's parliamentary elections prompted expressions of support from both King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa and leading Shi'a cleric Shaikh Isa Qassim. In a May 3 press conference, Al Wifaq Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman made the formal announcement to participate and outlined Al Wifaq's agenda leading up to the elections and after the new parliament convenes. He focused on constitutional changes, election district imbalances, and the need for election monitoring, while declaring Al Wifaq's opposition to the military being allowed to vote. Al Wifaq elections chairman Jawad Fairouz outlined in a separate meeting with PolOff that the GOB continues to throw obstacles on the table as attempts to minimize the success of the opposition in the next election. Nonetheless, he concludes that Shi'a candidates, including Al Wifaq and independent Shi'a, could win 18 seats in the next parliament, and alliances with other opposition political societies could add two or three opposition Sunni or secular seats. Al Wifaq consultative (Shura) council member Majeed Milad confirmed that Al Wifaq's membership is pleased with the decision to participate and is looking for the Royal Court to show its appreciation by bringing concessions to the table. He also said that leading Shi'a cleric Isa Qassim is expected to be vocal this election season. End summary.

Congratulations from All Sides

¶2. (C) In the wake of leading Shi'a opposition political society Al Wifaq's decision on May 1 to participate in legislative elections (reftel), Minister of the Royal Court Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Al Khalifa placed a call May 3 to Al Wifaq Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman to convey King Hamad's congratulations for taking this important step. He said that the King stressed that Al Wifaq's participation would enhance democratic progress and reform in Bahrain. Leading Shi'a cleric Isa Qassim gave his nod to the decision in his May 5 Friday sermon saying, "We acknowledge the right of the peaceful opposition to take advantage of the constitution and the national charter, but most importantly we want to make sure that it takes the green light from legitimate religious sources." A source close to Al Wifaq indicated that Shaikh Ali was seeking to obtain a fatwa from prominent Shi'a clerics (Marja'iyah) outside the country. Such religious edicts would encourage the Shi'a in Bahrain to vote and support the election and thus undermine the argument being made by those still supporting an election boycott,

most notably the Shi'a hard-line Haq Movement.

Al Wifaq to Target Sensitive Issues

¶3. (U) Shaikh Ali and chairman of Al Wifaq's Shura council Dr. Abd Ali Hassan held a press conference May 3 to officially announce Al Wifaq's decision to break from the four-year boycott. Shaikh Ali said that constitutional changes will be the top priority for Al Wifaq members once in parliament. He echoed this point in his Friday sermon May 5, saying that attempts to amend the constitution would continue, including pressure from the Bahraini street. In an interview May 15 with an English daily, Shaikh Ali commented further, saying that Bahrain needed to return to "most of" the 1973 constitution, which had been approved by the people. The existence of a 40-member Parliamentary Shura Council that is appointed entirely by the King "is not democratic."

¶4. (U) Regarding the elections, Shaikh Ali described the gerrymandered constituency distribution as a major concern for Al Wifaq. Votes in Southern Governorate districts can equal as many as 23 votes in districts elsewhere. He proposed a single constituency system whereby the ballots of all voters country-wide would be tallied together and parliamentary seats would be distributed based on the national vote. He proposed that the military not be allowed to vote since it is highly influenced by the government and therefore unfairly biased. He also advocated that local and international organizations be allowed to observe the elections. In terms of legislation current before parliament, Shaikh Ali pointed to the need for more press freedom and wider allowances for freedom of assembly.

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¶5. (C) In a May 6 meeting with PolOff, Al Wifaq Chairman of the High Council for Elections Jawad Fairouz accused the GOB of looking for new ways to limit the presence of the opposition in the Council of Representatives (COR). He pointed to recently proposed legislation that would prohibit for ten years the election participation of anyone who had been sentenced to more than six months in prison. If this law were enacted, a large number of opposition members would be unable to vote or run in the upcoming elections. Fairouz said that there were many members of the opposition who served jail time in the late 1990's due to their alleged involvement in the civil strife. Fairouz also pointed to the reported 25,000 to 30,000 individuals who live in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, but have Bahraini citizenship and are able to vote in the election. Since they are not tied to an address in Bahrain, and therefore a particular district, Fairouz fears that this floating vote can be used by the government where needed to tip the scales its way in close races.

Expectations for the Road Ahead

¶6. (C) In a conversation with EmbOff May 16, Manama Municipal Council member and Al Wifaq Shura council member Majeed Milad said that Al Wifaq supporters are very pleased with their leaders' decision, because they have not been satisfied with the performance of current MPs and would like to see opposition leaders address their concerns. He said that Al Wifaq and its supporters expect more from the Royal Court than a congratulatory phone call and a paragraph in the press. Al Wifaq has been supportive of the King's reform agenda and would like to see the palace reciprocate with more significant concessions. The King should address issues related to constitutional amendments, naturalization of non-Bahrainis, and sectarianism. Turning to dynamics in the Shi'a community, Milad referred back to 2002 when Shaikh Isa Qassim was not in favor of Al Wifaq's decision to boycott

that election but remained silent so that society membership would not be split. Shaikh Isa has indicated that he will not be quiet this time but will lend his support whenever needed, including to help counter the message by political leaders in the Haq Movement who are urging people to continue the boycott.

Al Wifaq Takes Stock

¶7. (U) Al Wifaq's entry to the political fold culminates a several month process that began in early November 2005 when Al Wifaq registered under the Political Societies Law of July 2005 and thereby gained legal legitimacy. Shaikh Ali told the press that in 2002 Al Wifaq and other opposition political societies were compelled to reject the changes in the 2002 Constitution that limited the power parliament exercised previously under the 1973 Constitution. Attempting to paint the last four years in the brightest of colors, he said that Al Wifaq had achieved its goal of highlighting the problems in the 2002 Constitution for the local and international communities and was now prepared to accomplish what it had not been able to do outside the political system.

Shaikh Ali explained that though the four boycotting societies formed a foundation for an alliance within the system, the door was open to coordination with any other political societies that have similar policy priorities. However, in cooperating with others, Al Wifaq will not give up a seat in any district where Al Wifaq is likely to win.

¶8. (U) Turning to Al Wifaq's internal nomination process, Shaikh Ali explained that the General Secretariat (Al Wifaq's Executive Cabinet) will draw up a list of suitable candidates for all legislative districts in which it can be competitive.

After discussion and approval by the Shura council, the society will announce its candidates. Al Wifaq may support candidates from other political societies and independents with whom it has found common ground. Candidates for municipal council elections will go through a similar process with one notable exception. Since over 50 potential candidates have already expressed interest in running for the municipal councils, Al Wifaq's municipal council committee will screen them before the General Secretariat generates its list.

Possible Opposition Majority in the COR

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¶9. (C) Shaikh Ali continues to state publicly that Al Wifaq will win 12 to 14 seats. While he personally has not yet committed to running, saying it is the society's decision whom it will ask to run, privately Al Wifaq members say that Shaikh Ali will run and win easily. Jawad Fairouz anticipated that the Shi'a, comprising Al Wifaq members and independent Shi'a, will win 18 seats, a full 50% increase over current Shi'a representation in the COR. In addition, according to Fairouz, opposition alliances with Sunni and secular candidates (from Al Wa'ad, for example) could result in two to three additional seats.

Comment

¶10. (C) Over the last several weeks Al Wifaq's decision to participate in the elections has generated some significant momentum leading into the campaign season. From the Al Wifaq General Secretariat's April 22 recommendation to its Shura in favor of participation, the Shura's May 1 vote, the May 3 press conference, and now continuing follow-up press stories, Al Wifaq has figured prominently in the news following several months of quiet while the group focused on internal

organizational issues. Al Wifaq's decision to participate likely came sooner than the group had wanted. A senior member told EmbOff that Al Wifaq wanted to announce its participation only after the government had specified the dates for the municipal and parliamentary elections. But with the government either floating or implementing policies that could be viewed as anti-opposition, the society decided to act before the prevailing political environment within the Shi'a community became less favorable, thus possibly complicating a decision to participate.

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